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AUTHOR Allen, Walter R.
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ABSTRACT

Adjustments, achievements, and aspirations of black undergraduates attending the University of Michigan were studied with a focus on characteristics correlating highly with black student continuance and successful matriculation. Questionnaire responses from 229 black undergraduates at the Ann Arbor campus provided information on: family background; high school background; student experiences at the university; student interactions with peers, faculty, and staff; student use of university supportive services; student attitudes and opinions; and problematic black student experiences. Findings include the following: 67 percent of the respondents were strongly satisfied with their decision to attend the university; fewer than 10 percent reported grade point averages of less than C; 42 percent aspired to attain a master's degree; nearly three-quarters of the respondents grew up in two-parent households and 60 percent were from families with incomes exceeding $21,000 per year; the students came from families with traditions of high educational attainment; they were high academic achievers in high school; over half initially applied to the university because of its academic reputation; after enrollment, about 30 percent of these student have seriously considered dropping out of school; respondents identified social adjustment and feelings of isolation as possible reasons for black attrition; 85 percent reported having encountered racial discrimination in some form while at the university, but 22 percent judged such acts to occur seldom; over 90 percent expressed the need for more black students; over 60 percent reported having had little or no contact with black faculty and staff. (SW)

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SUMMARY FINDINGS FROM A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF BLACK STUDENT ADJUSTMENT, ACHIEVEMENT AND ASPIRATIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (ANN ARBOR) WINTER, 1980 PRETEST OF A NATIONAL STUDY

September, 1981

by:

Walter R. Allen, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology and
Center for Afroamerican and
African Studies
University of Michigan

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DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA 27707

INSTITUTE ON DESEGREGATION

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COOPERATIVE PROJECT

This paper has been identified by a joint project of The Institute on Desegregation at North Carolina Central University and ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education at George Washington University. The purposes of this project are to identify, collect, and make available literature concerned with

(1) the problems of minority students in higher education in general and
(2) the problems of desegregation in historically black colleges and universities in particular.

New published and unpublished materials are reviewed and recommended by participants of the Institute on Desegratation's Interinstitutional Research Group (ID/IRG) for acquisition by ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. An annual bibliography of this material will be published under the names of ERIC and the Institute.

Various types of materials are being solicited, especially unpublished and unindexed materials, as well as publications, produced by faculty and staff members. Included in these may be unpublished faculty studies, institutional research studies, master's theses, monographs, papers presented at professional meetings, articles from general and scholarly periodicals, and conference and workshop proceedings not covered by ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education.

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If additional information is needed about this cooperative project or the criteria for selection of materials, please write or call the Director of the Institute on Desegregation at 919/683-6433, North Carolina Central University, Durham, North Carolina 27707.

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> By enactment of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the Congress committed this nation to the goal of equal opportunity for higher education for all Americans, regardless of race or economic circumstance. While progress has been made, this goal, the key to virtually all managerial and professional jobs, remains for the disadvantaged student an unfulfilled promise.
>
> (Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [1968], p. 452)

Research on the educational problems faced by minorities in general, and Black Americans in particular, has tended to focus on elementary and secondary schools. From Brown vs. Board of Education to the recent Supreme Court busing decisions, scant attention has been paid to the equally important topic of black students in higher education (Thomas, 1981).

Over the past quarter-century, revolutionary changes have occurred in black student patterns of college attendance. Whereas previously the overwhelming majority of black college students were enrolled in historically black college institutions, by 1973 that percentage had dropped significantly to roughly one quarter. Fully three-fourths of all black college students currently attend predominantly white colleges and universities (Abramowitz, 1976). At first glance, this relatively rapid redistribution of black college student enrollments might occasion celebration among those interested in the achievement of black educational equity. For certainly, the goal of desegregating public schools in this country, enacted into law by the Supreme Court decision of 1954, seems to have moved forward in the country's colleges and universities posthaste. However, more careful examination of the

situation leads one to draw less optimistic conclusions. Black students on white campuses continue to be severely disadvantaged relative to white students in terms of persistence rates (Di Cesare, 1972), academic achievement levels (Boyd, 1974), enrollment in advanced study (Abramowitz, 1976) and overall psycho-social adjustments (Webster, 1979).

Given the extensive evidence of race differences in college educational experiences and outcomes, some scholars have concluded that a state of crisis exists for black students on predominantly white campuses (Ballard, 1974). While we consider such a conclusion premature, we agree that an urgent need exists for improving the lot of black students enrolled at these schools. General limitations in our knowledge about the educational process in institutions of higher learning hamper efforts to improve student experiences and outcomes (Pantages and Creedon, 1978). We are particularly lacking in our understandings, from a process point of view, of what happens to black students between college entry and graduation or dropping out. This research sought, therefore, to lay the foundations for systematic study of the educational experiences and outcomes of a nationally representative sample of black students attending predominantly white universities. For without a clear understanding of the factors and relationships which combine to perpetuate black disadvantage in institutions of higher education, efforts to correct the problemmatic experiences and outcomes cited above will be doomed to failure.

Problem and Methods of Study

This study examined black undergraduate student adjustments, achievements and aspirations at The University of Michigan as a prelude to a larger, national study. It was particularly concerned with identifying factors and characteristics highly correlated with black student continuance and successful matriculation. Data for this report are from a Winter Semester, 1980 mailed questionnaire to which 229 black undergraduate students attending the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor Campus, responded (representing approximately 20% of the total). Each student completed and returned by mail, half-hour long, self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on the following areas: 1) family background information; 2) high school background; 3) student experiences at the University; 4) student interactions with peers, faculty and staff; 5) student use of University supportive services; 6) student attitudes and opinions; and, 7) problematic black student experiences (see copy of questionnaire in Appendix).

"Minority Recruitment, Enrollment, Retention and Graduation" were identified as important University priorities in the Fall, 1980 Office of Academic Affairs Report to the Regents. For this reason, our discussion of findings will be organized around these four activity categories. The report begins by discussing important factors in students' backgrounds, factors that are assumed to impact on black student recruitment and enrollemnt at the University of Michigan. The positive benefits of increased black student recruitment and enrollment are, of course, realizable only

to the extent that these students continue in school; thus black student retention becomes the next focus of attention. In this connection, the report concerns itself with black student adjustments to life as experienced at The University of Michigan. Finally, the report looks at black student academic performance levels and attainment aspirations in order to address the issues impacting their retention and graduation rates.

A major assumption of this study was that black student outcomes at The University of Michigan are the joint products of individual and institutional characteristics. It, therefore, sought to identify dysfunctional elements in University policies, procedures and practices, as well as, in black student orientations, characteristics and behaviors which combined to produce the unacceptably high attrition rate by 1980, of 70% among black students who entered the University in 1975 (cited in the Fall, 1980 "Report to the Regents": 21-24). This report summarizes significant dimensions of black student experiences and outcomes at the University. In the process, it also provides an empirical basis for the formulation of systematic policies, programs and actions aimed at increasing the numbers of black students successfully graduated from the University. Several additional reports on the statuses of black students at the University will follow as results come available from this researcher's Winter, 1981 cross-sectional study of randomly sampled black undergraduate, graduate and professional students at the University. In addition, the base year data collection for a five-year detailed, longitudinal

study of randomly sampled black undergraduate, graduate and professional students will occur Winter, 1982. The participation of five other universities nationally (U.C.L.A., University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Memphis State University, S.U.N.Y.-Stony Brook, and Arizona State University) should provide the University with a useful base for comparison as it attempts to assess the statuses of black students here in relative terms. Funding for this important project has been provided through grants from the Spencer and Ford Foundations.

Discussion of Findings

My discussion of findings from this study of black student adjustments, achievements and aspirations at the University will be in terms of important patterns in the data described by frequency distributions. Since no multivariate analyses are presented in this report, much of the complexity underlying black student retention/discontinuance is glossed over. Additional biases in our results may be due to differential response rates among differing segments of The University of Michigan's black student population (e.g., the most alienated or despairing students would not, in all probability, bother to complete and return their questionnaires). Readers are urged, therefore, to be cautious in interpreting these conclusions. Later reports will examine important bivariate and multivariate relationships and hopefully further clarify the link between black student experiences and outcomes.

It is logical to begin by examining student level of college satisfaction (Q. 25), U.M. Grade Point Average (Q. 5) and educational aspirations (Q. 55), since these respectively are our empirical indicators of black student adjustment, achievement and aspirations. Sixty-seven percent of the students responding expressed strong satisfaction with their decision to attend the University. For the most part, these students were performing well in their coursework with fewer than 10% reporting G.P.A.'s of less than C (2.0), and roughly 45% reporting G.P.A.'s of C+ (2.76) or higher. Only 3.5% reported G.P.A.'s above B+ (3.5), a decided shift from the 48% with B+ averages in high school. All but 1% of the students set the Bachelor's degree as their absolute minimum educational attainment goal, with another 42% desiring Master's level degrees and 40% preferring doctoral or terminal level degrees.

The obvious inconsistencies between observed black student attrition rates and reported satisfaction, achievement and aspiration levels demonstrates the necessity for more detailed examination of black student statuses, experiences and outcomes at the University. We accomplish this by turning our attention to student background characteristics and student interpersonal experiences on campus. The picture of student backgrounds which emerges from this study are such as to reject out of hand, long-held stereotypic views of black University of Michigan students. Nearly three-quarters of them grew up in two-parent households (Q. 15). Moreover, 60% are from families whose incomes exceed

$21,000 per year, with 38% reporting incomes of $30,000+ (Q. 12). These students come from families with established traditions of high educational attainment. Some 38% of respondents' fathers, 30% of mothers and 39% of siblings with most years schooling were reported to hold the Bachelor's or an advanced college degree (Q. 10).

Black students come to this University with demonstrated records of high academic achievement, thus one sees reported high school grade averages of B+ among nearly one-half of them. These students were also highly ranked in their graduating high school classes with 67% falling in the top ten percent. High school did not, however, prepare these students for the reality of being a racial minority in school settings, since fewer than 14 percent attended high schools where the black enrollment was less than 10 percent (Q. 9). Indeed, 48 percent of the students attended black majority high schools (60%+ black) prior to entering The University of Michigan where the proportion of black students enrolled was slightly more than 5% during Fall Term, 1980.

When black students' reasons for applying to and eventually attending The University of Michigan are considered, their emphasis on the University's academic reputation becomes apparent. Over half initially applied to the University because of its reputation for academic excellence (Q. 17). For roughly 35% of the students, this concern also provided the basis for their decision to finally attend Michigan (Q. 21). Historic links with the University through

family, friends or high school teachers and counselors who had attended Michigan were also commonly cited as central factors in student decisions to apply to and eventually attend the University.

Turning our attention now to the issue of black student adjustment, we ask the vital question of, "What happens to black students after they enter this university?" Why is it that these high achieving, highly motivated youngsters, whose backgrounds seem to predict success, do so poorly as a group?". Graduation from college clearly continues as a highly valued goal for them with 75% judging it extremely important and 22% considering it very important (Q. 23). It is significant to note, however, that after enrollment only 39 and 33%, respectively, consider graduation from Michigan (as opposed to some other college) to be extremely or very important (Q. 24). Further, some 30% of these students admit to having seriously considered dropping out of school at one time or another (Q. 39). Yet they continue, and among the most common reasons given for continuing in school are commitment and determination. Quoting from the students, we find them to persist because of: "Pride; I couldn't accept being defeated. Also, I feel as if I'm a role model for my younger brothers/ sisters."; "I want a good education from a school with a name."; "Determination to accomplish a task that has been labelled as difficult for anyone, but especially a black."; "I want to make it in life." (Q. 46). As inspiring as these responses are, however, they do not obviate the reality that black students drop out of this Institution in alarming numbers. Indeed, fully

three-quarters of these students were familiar with the case of at least one such dropout. According to our sample, these students dropped out due to problems that were largely academic (42%) or financial (21%) in nature. An additional one-third of the dropouts were said to result from adjustment difficulties (20.6%) and racial problems (11%) (Q. 38). Needless to say, academic problems often have their roots in problems of a different bent. It is interesting to note, therefore, that when asked to identify the single most serious problem faced by black students attending the University, only 14% of the sample responded with academics or the level of academic competition. Instead, factors such as cultural shock or the difficulty of social adjustment (22%) and feelings of isolation or lack of association with blacks (32%) were most commonly mentioned (Q. 41).

An answer to the puzzle created by the observed disjuncture between black student potential and eventual successes at this University seems to be emerging. We see evidence of considerable difficulties with social adjustment, problems which undoubtedly have negative consequences for black student outcomes. It is striking to note, for example, that nearly half of these students (46%) reported that they did not feel themselved to be part of the University's general campus life (Q. 30). Just under a third of the students (31%) felt that their interests weren't reflected in on-campus, extra-curricular activities (Q. 32). Adding to the generally expressed feelings of disaffection was the harsh reality of racial discrimination. The overwhelming

majority of students (85%) reported having encountered racial discrimination in some form or other while at the University (Q. 34). Notably, 22% of the students judge such acts to be seldom in occurrence (Q. 35). By the same token, where such acts were encountered, they tended to be subtle, rather than overt with students more commonly citing total avoidance (41%), subtle statements (35%) and subtle actions (15%) on the parts of whites (Q. 36B). Subtle or otherwise, race discrimination on this campus does seem to pose major difficulties for black student adjustments. A sampling of student comments on the most notable instances of racial discrimination encountered by them at the University follows: "Overhearing a psychology professor explain that 'black students don't get A's."; "Impossible to go into in just three lines."; "Innuendos on the part of students that compromise one's intelligence."; "Professor wouldn't talk to me, but would to a white student later on that same day."; "Seeing 'nigger' and 'KKK' painted on the house owned by a black organization." (Q. 37).

Delving more deeply into the social and interpersonal relationships of black students at Michigan, we find them expressing strong desires for an increased black student presence at the University with in excess of 90% seeing the need for more black students (Q. 31). Over 60% of the students report having had little or no contact with black faculty and staff here at Michigan. Perhaps recognizing that such contacts could assist in their adjustment and provide positive role models, nearly

three-quarters of these students expressed a desire for increased contact(s) with black faculty and staff (Q. 42). Nearly half (44%) report faculty as having no or few problems in communicating with black students; while 48% felt that faculty did not avoid interactions with black students outside the classroom (Q. 44A,B). However, there is the suggestion that faculty do not, as a rule, extend themselves beyond the mandated in dealing with black students. Thus, only a third of the sample report faculty as giving encouragement to pursue advanced degrees (Q. 44C) and 31% perceive them as being unconcerned with black student success (Q. 44D). The sample was divided in its assessment of the fairness of black student evaluations by professors with 34% judging these to be fair and the remainder being neutral (39%), or claiming these evaluations to be unfair (13%) (Q. 44E).

Additional paradoxes are posed for our interpretation of findings by black student evaluations of University supportive services. We find these to be consistently evaluated in a positive light. Roughly fifty percent of the students judge the responsiveness to financial aid, remedial academic services, resident advising and academic counseling to be adequate or very adequate for their needs. From a structural support point of view, therefore, this University would seem to be meeting the needs of black students with a reasonable degree of success. These students have few complaints about faculty interactions or University offices and the services which they provide. Yet the object reality tells us that something is missing from the

experiences of black students at Michigan; something which increases their chances of discontinuance. It may well be that black students are lacking a sense of "belonging", since the representation of blacks at all levels of the University student body, faculty and administration is sparse. If this is indeed the case, any response by the University which fails to address black students' feelings of isolation, alienation and disaffection will only be partially successful. The validity of this conclusion is borne out by the students' responses to the query over the kinds of programs or policies they would institute as President of the University in order to improve the experiences of black students. Forty percent of the students indicate that they would stress increased recruitment-enrollment of black students and the addition of more black faculty and staff. In this respect, black students at the University in 1980 echo the sentiments of black students during 1970. They wish to see an increased black presence at this University and all that such an increase would imply in terms of greater support of, stronger identification among and enhanced sensitivity toward black students here.

Summary and Conclusions

At the beginning of this report, I acknowledged that there were joint responsibilities to be met by black students and this University for insuring successful black student outcomes. I cannot in good conscience, therefore, advance conclusions which would lay responsibility for the dismal discontinuance rates among

black undergraduates at this Institution wholly at their feet, or for that matter at the feet of the University. Consequently, I will talk about the nature of the responsibilities (both implied and explicit) residing with each of these parties.

There is a major assumption that students will enter college with adequate preparation and sufficient self-motivation to insure that they are able to take maximum advantage of the opportunities for learning and advancement afforded by the University. Universities, on the other hand, are expected to provide optimal settings (in academic and social-psychological terms) where these talented young minds will find ample opportunity to develop to their fullest potential. Under normal circumstances, then, one expects to find symbiotic relationships between students and Universities; relationships where each feeds the needs of the other to the mutual benefit of both. It is evident from the various data, however, that black students at The University of Michigan are not, in numbers of sufficient size to cause great concern, striking such a productive relationship.

In our search for plausible explanations of this seeming disjuncture between black students and the University, we are forced to admit that the partnership mentioned above is an unequal one. That is, while black students bear some responsibility for how they fare here, theirs is not necessarily the pivotal role. The educational mission of this University charges it with the responsibility for developing and implementing strategies which

provide for the effective education of the State's diverse population. Towards this end, personnel and facilities among the finest available in this Nation have been assembled in order to achieve this goal. As the University is the vehicle through which students matriculate, ultimate responsibility and resources for making this transition by black students (and all students, for that matter) at Michigan a smooth one must be said to rest with the institution, its officers, faculty and staff.

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